Europe: The Myth and the Nightmare

Europe has always lived in contradiction. The continent that gave the world democracy also gave it fascism. The home of cathedrals and cafés is also the graveyard of wars and genocides. Today, the European Union lives between two powerful poles of imagination: the myth of Romantic Europe and the

nightmare of Fortress Europe. In between lies the muddled reality: survival in the global power game.

I. The Myth: Romantic Europe

In its self-image, Europe is a civilizational jewel. It is the continent of Erasmus exchanges, open borders, and students drinking wine in

Prague or Barcelona, bound together by a shared sense of being “European.” It is Parisian cafés, Viennese concert halls, Greek ruins at sunset.

It is also the moral conscience of the world: the birthplace of human rights, a laboratory for post-national democracy, a beacon of ecological transformation. Green initiatives, climate laws, and sustainability

frameworks mark Europe as the first bloc to take planetary survival seriously.

This is the Europe of Kant, Beethoven, Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt. A Europe whose power is not in armies but in attraction, a place where culture, ideas, and rights radiate outward. In the myth, Europe leads not by domination, but by example.

Yet, as Simone Weil once wrote, “Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring.” The myth of Europe, radiant and romantic, conceals the monotonous bureaucratic compromises and barren parliamentary quarrels underneath.

II. The Nightmare: Fortress

Europe

Behind the myth lurks another Europe: one of walls and fear. Migration has become the fracture line. At Calais, camps of displaced people are bulldozed; in the Mediterranean, boats sink while Frontex patrols tighten. Italy strikes deals with Tunisia to stop migrant departures; Greece builds detention centers; Hungary erects razor-wire fences. “Fortress

Europe" is no longer metaphor — it is policy.

Populist movements feed this fear. In France, the National Rally under Marine Le Pen edges ever closer to real power. In Germany, the AfD surges in the east, threatening to normalize far-right discourse. Italy under Giorgia Meloni wraps nationalist rhetoric in EU respectability. Hungary under Orbán openly speaks of

“illiberal democracy” while pocketing EU funds.

Meanwhile, the supposed “green pioneer” falters. Macron watered down climate rules under pressure from farmers’ protests. Germany, squeezed by its industrial lobbies, slows its energy transition. The European Parliament passed ambitious targets, but the Council of states diluted them into vagueness. The

“Green Deal” looks more like a green mirage.

Nietzsche’s warning feels alive here: “Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.” The conviction that Europe is still a beacon can blind its citizens to the fortress taking shape around them.

III. The Reality: Survival in the Power Game

Between myth and nightmare lies the gray survival mode. The EU doesn't implode, but it rarely rises. It muddles through: compromise after compromise, delay after delay. Enough unity to keep the project alive, never enough to project decisive power.

Globally, Europe is

overshadowed. The United States still provides the military umbrella. China dominates technology and industry. Russia menaces with energy and war. Europe plays the role of market, ally, negotiator — useful, but not decisive. Its influence lies in standards and norms: GDPR data laws, consumer protections, climate rules. These reshape the world slowly, like tectonic shifts, but lack the drama of power

politics.

Kierkegaard would call this angst — not the fear of collapse, but the dizziness of possibility. “Anxiety,” he wrote, “is the dizziness of freedom.” Europe is dizzy because it knows it can become myth or nightmare, but cannot decide which path to take.

IV. The Unresolved Question

Europe's future hangs between its café myth and its fortress nightmare. If it clings only to the myth, it risks irrelevance: a museum continent admired but powerless. If it succumbs to the nightmare, it betrays its very ideals and hollows itself from within.

Perhaps the truth is that

Europe's vocation is not to be a superpower in the American or Chinese sense, but to live with contradiction — to remain an unfinished cathedral, never complete. Its survival might not be heroic, but survival itself is a radical act in a century of empires and autocrats.

Nietzsche once imagined Europe as the laboratory of the Übermensch — the place where humans might

transcend old categories. Weil, more sober, reminded us that “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” Europe swings between Nietzsche’s vision of transcendence and Weil’s call for roots. Between the myth of universal culture and the nightmare of exclusion.

That is Europe’s task: to endure the paradox without

collapsing into either illusion or bunker. To live, as Kierkegaard insisted, in the tension — because “the greatest hazard of all, losing one’s self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all.”

Europe’s challenge is not to lose itself, quietly, behind walls.

Epigram

“Europe’s greatest danger is not collapse, but forgetting what it is while still standing.”